PROLOGUE

Scene Setting

At first, the scene felt surreal; like a throw back in time. Here we were, my wife and I, right at the junction of St Dominic Street and Our Lady of Mercy Street, in the town of Żejtun, on a sunny but windy Sunday morning in April 2016. As we emerged from a side street onto the street intersection, we passed by the Tico Tico Bar, which, we could not miss, was quite a hive of activity. It was mainly coffee and tea (but also beer) along with "pastizzi" that were being served to, and enjoyed by, a bunch of rowdy, middle-aged males. Given the fine weather, many of the patrons of the corner bar had spilled over onto the street. Many were sporting small cages, each containing a prized songbird: probably a finch that had been caught as an outcome of bird trapping. Sensing each other's company, the birds would sing to compete for the attention of any female in the vicinity; the quality of their vocal talents could well determine their value, and such birds could be traded for princely sums. By the same measure, and also sensing each other's company, the men were also enjoying the attention that was being heaped on them – even if mainly instigated by and deflected from the gaze on their little captives – by the casual passers-by.

But: The illusion of being somehow ensconced in the past would not hold for long. Many of the birdcage handlers were also sporting trendy smart phones in their other hand. The Tico Tico Bar is advertised on the World Wide Web, and has its own Facebook page. And as for us, observing the scene, we were taking part, along with some 40 other folk, in a guided walking tour of the old streets of Żejtun, formerly parts of the hamlets of Ħal-Bizbut and Ħal-Ġwann. The event had been organised by Wirt iż-Żejtun: a local, non-government organisation working in the heritage sector, and launched as recently as 2010. This tour was being conducted in English, for the benefit of the many expatriates now residing in Żejtun and the rest of the Maltese Islands, and who may have a strong interest in local culture, history and tradition (Wirt iż-Żejtun, 2016). Some of these were happily zapping photos and taking videos of the scene unfolding outside the Tico Tico.

Islands in the stream

It would be dull, naïve and outright incorrect to argue that globalisation has, finally, caught up with the Maltese Islands. First, the past is visibly intertwined in the present; and – as the Tico Tico scene above attests – the global is tightly enmeshed in the local. It is true that modernity has the habit of stamping out or replacing lingering vestiges of and from the past. But, the same dynamic of freshness also gifts some (though not all) of these relicts with a new lease of life, reconfiguring them as cool exemplars of culture and heritage that are embraced by locals as beacons of stability in a turbulent ocean of change and insecurity. These 'identity exponents' are then consumed and appreciated by visitors and tourists on the lookout for morsels and snippets of authentic difference and exotic peculiarity.

Second, specific social and political forces will privilege and encourage certain elements of change but impede and blunt others. Reflect on how certain technologies and practices may have taken their time to reach Maltese shores: the printing press only arrived in 1642; it was not until 1959 that the first television set arrived in Malta; wireless radio transmissions started in 1973; and the right to divorce in 2011. And yet, some avant-garde technologies and practices were pioneered in Malta: consider the two muzzle-loading Armstrong 100-ton cannons, then the largest in the world, mounted at Fort Cambridge and Fort Rinella in the 1880s. And Fort Rinella itself was the first ever fully mechanised fort in history (Tunbridge, 2008). It would be fair to say that military concerns associated with administering a strategic base speeded up the introduction of specific techniques in the Maltese islands; whereas a religious conservatism bred over centuries thwarted or applied brakes to many other considerations.

Third, given humankind's clear penchant for claiming agency, legacy and impact, the solid and resolute impact of geography and climate on human events is often trivialised or under-rated. And yet, these geophysical forces have shaped and constrained societies – as they implacably continue to do – influencing the myriad and intricate networks and conduits by means of which goods, ideas, beliefs and people have been bought and sold, imposed and bartered, disseminated and exchanged (Cunliffe, 2001). The notion that 'geography is destiny' (De Blij, 2010) forcibly removes us from the immediacy of alleged revolution that politicians with typically very short-term horizons would foist on us; as much as from the determinist 'growth and recession' paradigmatic cycles that economists are so enamoured of. Sitting back, and fumbling with the magnification of the lens that guides our social analysis, we are reminded of the staying power of location, of material resourcefulness, of environmental heritage.

Context begets destiny

Thus, to (better) understand the (sociology of the) Maltese Islands, let us – like Braudel (1985, 1972) – put them in their proper material place. We depart from Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, itself the towering mainland to an expansive "outer ring of insular landmarks" (Dalli, 1998, p. 76). Sicily lies at the heart of a sprawling island archipelago that controls the narrow straits at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. This island assemblage starts from Stromboli in the Aeolian islands in the North-east, sweeping across Sicily and its contiguous Egadi islands on its west end, then down to the more remote trio of Pantelleria, Linosa and Lampedusa; the latter is closer to Africa than Sicily. The Maltese Archipelago, a sovereign state, lies to the South of Sicily. Then on to the Kerkennah islands and Djerba, to Sicily's South-west, off the coast of what today is Tunisia. This 'Sicilian archipelago' (Baldacchino, 2015) has very rarely belonged to the same political or military power: Rome is the main exception; and the Normans, but briefly, and much

thereafter. Thus, the region's fragmentation and division under different powers and belief systems and, in the modern period, under different blocs and sovereign states, deflects from an appreciation that it is indeed one continuous and contiguous archipelago, sharing a common, great sea (Abulafia, 2011). It is in the circulation of people, religious beliefs, traded goods, shared fishing practices and heavy environmental impacts that this dynamic island network comes into its own and defies both the fission and the consequential borders thrust upon it (Coll, Piroddi, Albouy et al., 2012; Bouchard, & Lollini, 2006).

Hence emerges Malta's irrevocable destiny to serve as a cosmopolitan hub in (and to) its dynamic coastal neighbourhood; a vocation enhanced by its excellent (and therefore attractive) sheltered Grand Harbour. Maritime practices, skills and traditions have defined Malta's history over many centuries. Only in recent decades have we shifted our focus and bias away from the marine and towards land based imaginaries and techniques. This geographical destiny is enhanced by the triple circumstances of smallness, islandness and jurisdiction.

Contrast with geographical neighbours

Malta is the 34th largest island in the Mediterranean; Gozo the 67th. Combining a mere land area of 316 km^2, and with no mountains (highest elevation: 253 metres), these islands are too small and flat to sustain a microclimate of their own. They thus also receive little rain, have no natural year-round watercourses and are officially 'semi-arid' limestone blocks. With little vegetative cover, these rocks have been open territory to pirates looking for easy plunder or slaves for centuries. Practically the whole of Gozo's population – between 5,000 to 6,000 persons – was carried away into slavery following a pirate raid in 1551 (Kardelis, 2010). The first parishes in Gozo outside its capital city of Rabat (with its citadel) were only declared in 1688: the threat of being plundered or carried away on a pirate ship lasted this long (Wettinger, 1990).

So much would have placed the Malta archipelago in the same league as neighbouring Pantelleria (land area: 83 km^2; highest elevation: 836 metres); Lampedusa (land area: 20 km^2; highest elevation: 133 metres) and Linosa (land area: 5 km^2; highest elevation: 195 metres). Yet, the total population of this island trio is around 16,000. Their economies depend on transfers from the central Italian state, plus small-scale tourism. What a sharp contrast to the Maltese islands' 420,000 residents and diversified economy.

We owe this difference to the jurisdictional status of a sovereign state which is itself an outcome of a whim by Philip II of Spain to gift the islands to the Knights of St John in 1530, effectively excising Malta and Gozo from their island neighbours and the clutches of rapacious Aragonese, Castillian and Sicilian nobles who lorded over these fiefdoms. Effects become themselves causes in the morass of social history. To cut a long (and unfinished) story short, from the aristo/theocracy that was the Order of the Knights of St John and including its dedication to "corsairing to commerce" (Vassallo, 1997); a brief but eventful French occupation; a long period of benign British rule; and a dramatic switch away from the fortress economy model since 1957 ... all this and more has paved the way to political independence as Europe's smallest sovereign island state (1964); accession to the European Union (2004); and a bustling economy that boasts a rich diversity, now powered by increasing numbers of foreign workers. Malta remains very much "on the move" (Central Office of Statistics, 2000).

Celebrating Maltese Societies

Here then is the geo-political smorgasbord on which unfolds the contemporary Maltese society that is celebrated and critiqued in this rich, ambitious and timely volume. It is a society that shares, to some extent, the languid tempos of small island populations whose members grow up and operate within a straitjacket of community surveillance and ascribed criteria (Boissevain, 1974); but then it also practises those hectic lifestyles driven by international corporate interests who have made Malta a base, or even a hub, for their regional or global operations of late. Fiercely Latin in temperament, including being boisterous and rowdy as a social public (Mitchell, 2012); bearing a deeply British colonial (and particularly institutional) inheritance (Mallia-Milanes, 1988; Zammit, 1984); and maintaining a keen affinity with neighbouring Italian culture; it would be fairer, and in agreement with Buttigieg (1995), to speak of Maltese societies.

The tensions of the past are also the appurtenances of the challenges of the present, and presumably of the future. As a fortress colony (Pirotta, 2001, 1991, 1987), the Maltese islands sought to determine who was to be welcomed to, and who was to be repulsed from their shores: massive fortifications, a testament to engineering ingenuity and hard labour, bear testimony to this lingering policy challenge, and its associated 'siege mentality' (Baldacchino, 2012).

This condition is now finding a renewed lease of life, with Malta as a component to the edge of an increasingly tense and protectionist European continent ambivalent (at best) and hostile (at worst) to waves of desperate immigrants from South and East (Baldacchino, 2014). The move away from rigid definitions of family, civil unions and identity/ies is also a shift from a more dogmatic and monist interpretation of the world - powered by Church and Political Party - towards a more pluralist and pluri-centric one: Is this not an unstoppable wave of secularisation and political de-alignment that worries the establishment (Vella, 2013; Fenech, 2012)? From a mainly agricultural and pastoral society wedded to the land in the 19th century (Busuttil, 1965), we have moved briskly to an industrial epoch pivoted around Malta Drydocks and light manufacturing fuelled by foreign investment and technology in the 20th century (Sklair, 1991; Bowen-Jones, Dewdney & Fisher, 1962). Now Malta looks like it is heading towards a service dominated nexus set-up – with information and communication technology, finance, gam(bl)ing, education, niche tourism – energised by supplies of high levels of knowledge capital, including net inward migration and brain circulation, in the 21st century. These trends are bound to unsettle current markers of social class, gender, race/ethnicity and social distinction: the rapid rise in the female participation rate in recent years is but one, apt example of this decoupling (Mangion, 2016). Avid consumerism, traffic lock jam and a property boom have given rise to a noticeable backlash of environmental activism, reminding us – for all our wild dreams and lofty ambitions – of the finite nature of our land base and the dubious sustainability of current lifestyle habits (Mallia, 1994). Blogs, Facebook and Twitter instantly accessible on smart phones are changing the way in which politics play out on the Maltese landscape, elbowing their way through, but not quite replacing, the mass meetings, home visits and public broadcasts that have been staple practices in this field for decades (Briguglio, 2016).

Conclusion

The continuities and changes that have been lightly touched upon above are evidenced in the character of this volume. There is a practically equal proportion of female and male contributors; and the choice of topics dealt with has a definitive post-industrial feel. We must credit the pioneering work of non-Maltese nationals who dared propose critical but insightful accounts of Maltese society; as well as the various members of the first generations of Maltese social scientists, many of whom were, at some point in time, members of the Catholic clergy. *Sociology of the Maltese Islands* joins a fairly exclusive pedigree of comprehensive yet critical scholarship that will help this and future generations take stock of the current state of play in Maltese Society, while acknowledging snippets of its tumultuous past and somehow hinting warily at what is yet to come.

Godfrey Baldacchino